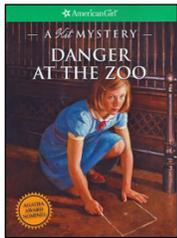




Teacher's Guide for *Danger at the Zoo: A Kit Mystery*

Book and "Teacher's Guide" Written by Kathleen Ernst
Book Published by American Girl 2005

Synopsis



In 1935, Kit lands a summer job writing a children's column for her local newspaper. She looks for story ideas at the Cincinnati Zoo, where her friend Stirling works as a guide and her old friend Will, the hobo, has a job cleaning cages. As Kit noses around, she stumbles into some strange activities in the monkey house. Meanwhile, Kit begins to notice small things missing at home, too. It's not long before Will looks like the logical suspect in both places. Can Kit clear her friend—and get a good story in the bargain?

Activity Suggestions

1. During the Great Depression, zoo managers such as Superintendent Stephan had difficult choices to make. Keepers were beginning to understand the importance of moving animals from concrete-and-bars cages to more natural environments. At the same time, zoo employees were struggling to take care of their families. Lead a discussion, or ask students to make oral presentations, highlighting both sides of the issue. How many students would postpone improvements for the animals in order to pay higher wages? How many believe the money should be spread evenly among animals and people?
2. *Danger at the Zoo* is set in 1935, in the middle of the worldwide Great Depression. Help students brainstorm different methods historians and authors might use to learn about this period.

While working on *Danger at the Zoo*, Kathleen Ernst used books, websites, newspapers preserved on microfilm, photographs, postcards and guidebooks from the Cincinnati Zoo, architecture, visits to zoos to learn about animal behavior, and visits to historical museums. Allow students to view the old newspaper clippings and photographs in the *Danger at the Zoo: The Stories Behind the Story* blog post: http://kathleernerst.com/book_danger_zoo.php

Then lead a discussion about how information and ideas from specific newspaper articles and photographs made their way into the novel. How many examples can the students identify?



3. Follow the brainstorming session in #1 by guiding students through their own exploration of a variety of resources to learn more about the Great Depression. (For online resources, see "For Further Exploration," at the end of this guide.)

To strengthen the connection between this activity and *Danger at the Zoo*, guide students through the production of a classroom newspaper. Ask each student to choose a topic, research the subject, then write an article about it, just as Kit did in the story. Students might choose kid-focused stories, or they might prefer to look for a serious investigative report.

4. During the Great Depression, hobos like Will served as migrant workers. They traveled the country in search of work, most often finding seasonal jobs on farms. Invite a modern migrant worker to talk with the class, or share a book about today's migrants with your students. Lead a discussion: what is different about the lives of historical and contemporary migrant workers? What is the same? Ask students to map the journey of migrant workers who visit their area.
5. Discuss examples of cooperation and interdependence among individuals and groups found within *Danger at the Zoo*. How did the Great Depression encourage cooperation between people? (Answers might include the need for Kit's family to take in boarders, or the system hobos used to communicate with each other.) How did the economic hardships discourage cooperation? (Answers might include some hobos' distrust of people they met along the way, or that some people with very little money might be less inclined to help others.)
6. In *Danger at the Zoo*, Mr. Barta's inability to communicate effectively made it almost impossible to be understood. In the end, his recognition of Hungarian baked treats called *kiflis* helped Kit guess his ethnic identity. Besides food, what other ways do people express and celebrate their cultural identity? (Examples include language, stories, folk tales, music, artwork, and dance.)
7. Lead a discussion: What role did setting play in the novel? How can an author control descriptions of settings to establish different moods? You may wish to review passages about the zoo, such as on pages 32, 136, and 138-139.



The zoo was one of the most important community places in Depression-era Cincinnati. It was a place not only to see animals, but also to listen to opera, go skating, enjoy band and dance performances, and enjoy picnics. What important places for community members exist in your area? Ask students to identify a favorite public place, and write a poem or article or story about it. They may write from their own perspective, or you can ask them to interview others to gain broader perspectives. Or ask them to describe a place from two different perspectives, using words that suggest two different moods or experiences.

8. At the end of *Danger at the Zoo*, Mrs. Dalrymple presented Kit's mother with a quilt. The original pattern, popular during the 1930s, was called "Grandmother's Flower Garden," but Mrs. Dalrymple renamed the quilt "Mrs. Kittredge's Flower Garden" to personalize her gift. Provide students with hexagonal graph paper and let them color an original quilt pattern as a gift for someone special in their lives, or to commemorate a special event. Create a paper quilt on a bulletin board by posting the students' work.

For Further Exploration

A factual and colorful exploration of many of these themes can be found in the book: *Welcome to Kit's World, 1934: Growing Up During America's Great Depression*, by Harriet Brown (Pleasant Company: Middleton, WI 2002).

Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden

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Phone (513) 281-4700

<http://cincinnati-zoo.org/>

The zoo's website offers details about their programs and educational offerings.

Library of Congress/American Memory – Farm Security Administration

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html>

The photographs of the Farm Security Administration show Americans at home, at work, and at play, with an emphasis on rural and small-town life and the adverse effects of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and increasing farm mechanization. This rich collection provides many opportunities for online study, and inspiration for creative writing projects. The Library of Congress website

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also has section to designed to help educators integrate their collection into cross-curricular projects.

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/>

The New Deal Network

<http://newdeal.feri.org/>

The New Deal Network, an educational guide to the Great Depression, is sponsored by the Roosevelt institute. Development of the NDN was funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The site includes lesson plans, photos, examples of student projects, discussion lists, and other resources.

Agatha Award Nominee for Best Children's/Young Adult Mystery
— **Malice Domestic**

"With equal parts suspense and intrigue, *Danger at the Zoo* will hold middle grade readers' imaginations until its swift and satisfying conclusion."

— **Ohio Library Association**

"Those who love 'American Girl' will be clamoring for it."

— **School Library Journal**

Danger At The Zoo is available as a softcover book from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and independent booksellers. It is also available in electronic version for he Amazon Kindle and the Barnes & Noble Nook. New, first-edition, hardcover copies can be acquired directly from the author, Kathleen Ernst, who will be happy to sign and personalize them for you. For more about the story, click on http://www.kathleernerst.com/book_danger_zoo.php